

## Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 BANGKO 12490 01 OF 02 270737Z

11

ACTION EA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6569

INFO AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

COMUSMACHTAI

AMEMBASSY MANILA

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

DIA WASHDC

AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 12490

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PINT, TH

SUBJ: KHUKRIT'S GRIP

REF: BANGKOK'S A-130

SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER KHUKRIT PRAMOT ENJOYS HIS JOB. HE IS SLOWLY AND PAINSTAKINGLY BUILDING HIS LEADERSHIP, BOTH IN DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICY. WITH AN IMAGE THAT TOWERS OVER HIS LACKLUSTER CABINET, KHUKRIT HAS A GOOD GRIP ON THE REINS OF POWER. THAILAND'S PROBLEMS, HOWEVER, ARE NEW AND TAXING TO NATIONAL SELF-CONFIDENCE. THE COUNTRY'S MOOD, THEREFORE, LEAPS BETWEEN OPTIMISM FOR THE FUTURE AND PESSIMISTIC, BUT SO FAR BASELESS, COUP RUMORS. KHUKRIT SHOULD NEVERTHELESS NOT HAVE TO FACE A SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL CHALLENGE UNTIL THE NEARLY SIMULTANEOUS PARLIAMENTARY BUDGET DEBATE AND RETIREMENT OF ARMY COMMANDER KRIT SIWARA LATE THIS SUMMER OR EARLY FALL. END SUMMARY

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PAGE 02 BANGKO 12490 01 OF 02 270737Z

1. INTRODUCTION. REFAIR DISCUSSES THE DURABILITY OF THE

KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT. THE POINTS IT MADE ARE STILL RELEVANT. THE FOLLOWING REPORT IS A WINDSOCK OF THE PRESENT ATMOSPHERE WHERE WE CONTRAST THE REALITY OF KHUKRIT'S POWER WITH THE EBB AND FLOW OF POPULAR FEARS THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL FALL AT THE SLIGHTEST BREEZE.

2. THE DOMESTIC SCENE.

A. THAILAND, FOR ALL ITS ECONOMIC AND HUMAN POTENTIAL, IS STILL MUDDLING THROUGH AN INTRESPECTIVE PERIOD IN DOMESTIC POLITICS WHICH WOULD BE LABELED A CRISIS OF SELF-CONFIDENCE IN OTHER COUNTRIES. POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND LABOR STRIKES ARE PREDICTABLE PHENOMENA AT THE PRESENT STATE OF THAILAND'S ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL GROWTH. BECAUSE THE COUNTRY HAS NEVER BEFORE EXPERIENCED THESE GROWING PAINS, HOWEVER, THEIR EXISTENCE IS TAKEN AS SOME FATAL LAPSE OF THE THAI SYSTEM. COUP RUMORS ABOUND AND THE NAY SAYERS PREDICT RUINATION. NEWSPAPERS EXAGGERATE THE SITUATION AND THE PUBLIC VIEWS EVERY SOCIAL SKIRMISH AS A TEST OF THE GOVERNMENT'S WILL. PRIME MINISTER KHUKRIT PRAMOT'S MAJOR TASK, THEREFORE, IS TO RESTORE SELF-CONFIDENCE AND PROVE THAT A PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM CAN WORK IN THAILAND.

B. KHUKRIT HAS INCREASINGLY DEMONSTRATED THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS NOT THE PAWN OF ACTIVIST FORCES, DESPITE THE MEDIA ATTENTION THEY RECEIVE. THE RECENT STRIKES AT THE DUSIT THANI HOTEL AND THE STANDARD GARMENT FACTORY HAVE QUIETED DOWN WITH THE GOVERNMENT GAINING POINTS WITH THE PUBLIC FOR ITS TOUGH, IF BELATED, STAND (BANGKOK 10933). IMPORTANTLY, THE CABINET ALSO DECIDED NOT TO SACRIFICE THE POLICE COMMANDER WHOSE MEN OPENED THE STANDARD GARMENT WORKERS' PICKET LINES.

C. KHUKRIT IS TAKING A CALMER VIEW OF THE ACTIVISTS' POTENTIAL. DURING A FARMERS' DEMONSTRATION EARLIER THIS YEAR HE PATIENTLY LISTENED FOR HOURS TO THEIR GRIEVANCES. WHEN THE FARMERS LATER RETURNED COMPLAINING THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAD NOT GRANTED ALL THEIR DEMANDS, KHUKRIT LISTENED FOR A POLITE FEW MINUTES AND THEN SHOWED THEM THE DOOR. WITH POLITICALLY ADVANTAGEOUS HUMOR, KHUKRIT HAS ALSO INSTALLED ON THE GATE TO HIS RESIDENCE PEGS FOR FUNERAL WREATHS, A  
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PAGE 03 BANGKO 12490 01 OF 02 270737Z

POPULAR SYMBOL OF PROTEST.

D. KHUKRIT HAS ALSO MANAGED TO REDUCE THE DISRUPTION OF GOVERNMENT WORK WHICH MOST THAI BUREAUCRATS ASSUME IS ENDEMIC TO THAI DEMOCRACY. PROVINCIAL GOVERNORS REPORT FEW PROBLEMS FROM LOCAL PARLIAMENTARIANS. KHUKRIT HAS ATTEMPTED TO KEEP THE PARLIAMENTARIANS BUSY AND IN HIS DEBT FOR PATRONAGE. HE APPOINTED 43 TO NON-JOBS WITH MODEST SALARIES AS ADVISORS TO

THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE. HE HAS ALSO WORKED TO KEEP THE  
OPPOSITION PARTIES OFF BALANCE.

E. KHUKRIT HAS AOTHER STRENGTH IN HIS PUBLIC AND MEDIA  
IMAGE. HE STANDS HEAD AND SHOULDERS ABOVE THE MAJORITY OF  
HIS CABINET MEMBERS WHO ARE INCAPABLE OF PROJECTING AN IMAGE  
OF CONFIDENCE AND COMPTENCE (BANGKOK 5215). IN FACT, SOCIAL  
ACTION PARTY PERSONNEL CREATE THE PROGRAMS THAT MAKE THE  
KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT PUBLICLY ACCEPTABLE. NO OTHER PARTY HAS  
THE "BRAIN TRUST" ATTRIBUTED TO SAP. COMMONWISDOM IS THAT  
KHUKRIT COULD EASILY DOUBLE HIS PARLIAMENTARY DELEGATION IN  
THE NEW ELECTIONS.

F. AS THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATES ITS INDEPENDENCE  
OF THE ACTIVISTS, THE RIGHTISTS ARE REASSURED THAT THE  
COUNTRY IS NOT GOING TO HELL IN A RATTAN BASKET. THE USE OF  
THE RIGHTIST RED GAUR IN THE DUSIT THANI HOTEL STRIKE MAY BE  
AN INIDCATION THAT THE RIGHTISTS FEEL THAT THEY, LIKE LABOR  
AND STUDENTS, CAN USE THE TACTICS OF DEMONSTRATION AND  
INTIMIDATION.

G. SINCE ELCTORAL POWER BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE, THE KHUKRIT  
GOVERNMENT IS WORKING ON A NUMBER OF QUICK-RESULT PROGRAMS  
TO ENHANCE POPULAR SUPPORT. KHUKRIT HAS AN EYE ON  
INCREASING THE SIZE OF THE SOCIAL ACTION PARTY'S (SAP)  
PARLIAMENTARY DELEGATION. AMONG THESE PROGRAMS IS THE  
125 MILLION CANTON (TAMBON) IMPRVEMENTS BILL WHICH MADE  
MONEY AVAILABLE TO GROUPS OF VILLAGES IN RURAL AREAS.  
ANOTHER PROGRAM, THIS ONE FOR URBAN BANGKOK, IS WELL-  
PATRONIZED FREE BUS RIDES FOR STUDENTS. LATER WILL COME FREE  
BUS RIDE, MEDICAL CARE, AND EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE FOR THE  
CERTIFIED POOR.

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 01 BANGKO 12490 02 OF 02 270738Z

11

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BANGKOK 12490

3. FOREIGN POLICY.

A. KHUKRIT TOOK ADVANTAGE OF THE MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT (BANGKOK 8862) TO PUT HIMSELF AT THE FOREFRONT OF A NATIONALISTIC ISSUE. HIS ACTIONS DURING IT, AND STATEMENTS AFTERWARDS, DEPRIVED THE ACTIVIST DEMONSTRATORS AT THE EMBASSY OF A MONOPOLY ON NATIONALISM. MOST LOCAL OBSERVERS FEEL THE ACTIVISTS LOST CONSIDERABLE SUPPORT, AND THAT KHUKRIT GAINED IN PRESTIGE.

B. KHUKRIT HAS CONCLUDED A STATE VISIT TO MALAYSIA AND INDONESIA, A TRIP WHICH ENHANCED HIS IMAGE AS A STATESMAN. HE IS PLANNING TO VISIT PEKING AT THE END OF JUNE, AND TWO OTHER ASEAN COUNTRIES IN JULY. HIS WILLINGNESS TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY BESPEAKS CONSIDERABLE CONFIDENCE IN HIS CURRENT POLITICAL SECURITY.

4. THE FUTURE CRUNCH.

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PAGE 02 BANGKO 12490 02 OF 02 270738Z

A. KHUKRIT HAS SHOWN PROGRESS IN BUILDING NATIONAL SELF-CONFIDENCE. PART OF THIS SUCCESS DERIVES FROM THE FACT THAT NONE OF THE PROBLEMS THE GOVERNMENT HAS DEALT WITH SINCE FEBRUARY AS INVOLVED REAL SHIFTS IN BEDROCK POLITICAL PREROGATIVES. KHUKRIT HAS NOT FACED A DEFINITIVE AND SUBSTANTIAL POLITICAL OPPOSITION.

B. MOST OBSERVERS SELECT THE APPROACHING PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE OVER THE BUDGET BILL AS THE TIME WHEN THE FRAGILE RULING CONSERVATIVE COALITION WILL FALL APART. UNLESS OTHER EVENTS INTERVENE, KHUKRIT STANDS A GOOD CHANCE OF SURVIVING THIS TEST, PARTICULARLY IF HE GIVES THE MILITARY WHAT THEY WANT, AS HE APPARENTLY INTENDS TO DO. THE BUDGET QUESTION BECOMES CRUCIAL, HOWEVER, BECAUSE THE DEBATE WILL CLOSELY PRECEDE ARMY COMMANDER GENERAL KRIT SIWARA'S RETIREMENT. INDICATIONS STILL ABOUND THAT KRIT, HAVING MADE CERTAIN THAT ARMY FRIENDS WILL SUCCEED HIM, WILL ENTER POLITICS AND

PERHAPS BECME THE LEADER OF APOLITICAL PARTY OR A COALITION OF PARTIES. WITH KRIT AT THEIR HEAD, THE CNSERVATIVES MAY EEL THAT THEY NEED NOT RELY ON KHUKRIT AS MUCH AS THEY PRESENTLY DO. IT IS KRIT'S POLITICAL FUTURE, RATHER THAN THE BUDGET ISSUE, WHICH COULD BE THE MAJOR HURDLE FOR THE KHUKRIT COALITION COME SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER.

5. COMMENTS.

A. THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT HAS MADE A NUMBER OF POPULAR MOVES BUT SO FAR IT HAS DONE LITTLE TO SOLVE UNDERLYING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS. REAL PROBLEM SOLVING WILL REQUIRE MORE UNITY OF PURPOSE THAN THE PRESENT COALITION OGVERNMENT CAN MUSTER. IN THE SHORT RUN, KHUKRIT'S MAIN TASK IS TO STAY IN POWER, COMMUNICATE AN IMAGE OF CONFICENCE, AND MAKE THE PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM AN ACCEPTABLE WAY OF POLITICAL LIFE. IF KHUKRIT SUCCEEDS IN THE SHORT RUN, HE WILL HAVE THE CLOUT TO TACKLE THE BIGGER PROBLEMS. IF HE FAILS IN THESE MODEST GOALS, IT WON'T MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE WHETHR EARLY ON HE TRIED TOTACKLE THE BIGGER RPROBLEMS.

B. THE REAL TEST OF KHUKRIT'S GRIP ON THE RTG IS YET TO COME. PRESENT LABOE/ACTIVIST STORMS HAVE NOT BEEN AS GUSTY AS SUPPOSED. EACH GUST BENDS THAI SELF-CONFIDENCE, BUT HAS NOT BROKEN THE WILL TO CONTINUE THE CIVILIAN PARLIAMENTARY EXPERIMENT. KHUKRIT HAS LED THE RTG OVER A NUMBER OF SMALL CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 BANGKO 12490 02 OF 02 270738Z

HURDLES. IN DOING SO HE HAS INDICATED THAT HE IS ACTIVELY RULING THE COUNTRY AND WILL NOT BE A SLAVE TO ANY PRESSURE GROUP. THIS TACTIC HAS INCREASED PUBLIC ACCEPTABILITY AND HIS SELF-CONFIENCE, AND MADE IT POSSIBLE TO HOLD THE LINE AGAINST EACH SUCCEEDING CHALLENGE.

C. ARMY COMMANDER GENERAL KRIT HAS ANUMBER OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PREROGATIVES THAT HE MAY FEEL HE CAN PROTECT ONLY BY PUBLICLY PLAYING POLITICS. THE DEGREE OF STRAIN KRIT WOULD PLACE ON THE PRESENT CABINET DEPENDS ON THE WAY IN WHICH HE ENTERS POLTICS. KRIT COULD SERVE UNDER KHUKRIT AND WOULD NOT HAVE TO BECOME PRIME MINISTER TO FULFULL HIS NEEDS. HE COULD RECEIVE A CABINET POSITION WITHOUT JOINING A POLITICAL PARYT AND WITHOUT CAUSING A MAJOR CABINET RESHUFFLE. IF KRIT HAD MORE AMBITIOUS GOALS AND ENTERED THE CABINET AS THE HEAD OF A PARYT OR POLITICAL COALITION, HE MIGHT ALTER THE PRESENT POLITICAL MATRIX AND CREATE STRAINS FOR THE RULING COALITION. WE DO NOT KNOW AT THIS POINT WHICH PATH KRIT WILL FOLLOW, AND HE IS PROBABLY KEEPING HIS OWN OPTIONS OPEN. THE SALIENT POINT IS THAT A POLITICAL CLEAVAGE AMONG THE CONSERVATIVES, NOT A HOTEL STRIKE OR STUDENT DEMONSTRATION, IS THE LONGER RANGE THREAT TO KHUKRIT'S GRIP ON THE LEVERS OF POWER.  
WHITEHOUSE

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